



**Signatures on letters**  
in the Archive of Lucien Hervé

# lucien herv , from details to visions

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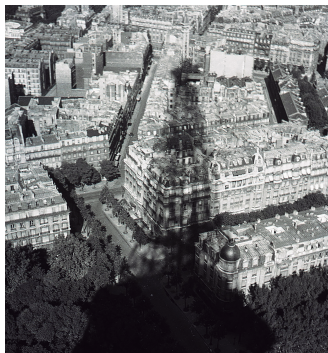
*Lucien Herv  (1910-2007) is one of the most important artists of architectural photography, best known as the photographer of Le Corbusier, though he travelled all around Europe and the world to work for other architects like Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, Aalvar Alto, Aulis Blomstedt, etc. "The role of the architectural photography is to reveal the work and to remain faithful, with humility, to its creator" (Lucien Herv ) Did Lucien Herv  –working on the commissions– act according to these principles? What did his clients expect him to do? This paper wishes to reveal the details of his commissions (conditions, expectations) using so far unpublished letters from the artist's archive. Some architects pre-calculate the ideal weather conditions, others draw sketches to precise the optimal angles or criticise the tone of these photos. Herv  creates big, analytic series on historical and new constructions and creates a dialogue between them. He becomes a self-taught specialist in architecture and urbanism, takes part in CIAM events, organises exhibitions based on the le corbusian theories, composes books and participates in the training of architect students. Architecture was a conviction for him, but it also became a tool in the service of a deeply human message.*

**keywords** Lucien Herv , Le Corbusier, modern architecture, photography correspondance

The international reputation of the photographer Lucien Hervé is fundamentally based on his architectural photographs composed by the geometrical balance of black and white tones, often transforming the architectural object into a series of abstract visions. However, this recognition seems to restrict Hervé's work as if it offered interest only for architects. Even if the majority of his photos were shots of buildings and urbanistic objects the artist himself declared: "humanism led me to architecture and urban studies, and through these I approached the relationship between people and their surroundings". For some years now the curators of his exhibitions have been trying to liberate Hervé from this exclusive regard and highlight his humanism and sense of humour to reveal in him the sensitive man and the socially critical eye. Indeed, before turning to photography, Hervé used to be politically engaged in the trade union movement and if he could become such a faithful messenger of the le corbusian urban visions it was due to this engagement as well. Nevertheless, neither the public nor the professionals are wrong in considering that the links between Hervé and architecture have a fundamental importance. The author of this paper wishes to turn back towards the Lucien Hervé, the photographer of architecture considering his written documents. The progress of the systematic digitalization and catalogueing his correspondence and his own writings bring up details about the way he worked on architectural commissions and the way he thought about architecture. The paper does not provide a complete list of the activities, of the professional collaborations or friendships of the photographer. It quotes as many sources as possible to draw an image of the nature and the tensions of the photographer's vocation.

### **the first steps towards architecture**

Hervé's career was marked by some crucial meetings, some of them with human constructions, others with human beings. The first construction to intrigue the young photographer of the Marianne Magazine and other illustrated papers even before the war was the Eiffel-Tower. "It started in 1939, the photographs of it were the first professional photos of my life, and I last photographed it in 1989, on the occasion of the centenary. [...] I agreed with what Eiffel said, [...] that something that is rational cannot be ugly. [...] Every building must fulfill expectations, it must have a purpose, but what makes it architecture is that little something that is more than a simple construction"<sup>1</sup>. These first shots are characterized already by his sharp cuts, and the strong contrast of black and white volumes.



**f1\_The Eiffel-tower**

Paris, 1949. Lucien Hervé

## lucien hervé, from details to visions

In the postwar period the most important personality to direct Hervé's career was the Dominican, Marie-Alain Couturier. Hervé, the 'proud' atheist, has found an open mentality, a strong commitment to the leading art of his century, a sort of a mentor in the Father. As a director of the revue *L'Art Sacré* Father Couturier commissioned photo reports on Matisse, Le Corbusier and other artists, dear to the photographer. Through these reports Hervé met creators and works that formed his own commitment to art and architecture. The monk's letters reveal his enthusiasm for the photos of Hervé: "Dear Monsieur, I gladly inform you that our cause is won: Monsieur Matisse agrees to publish as many photos as we want [...] You know how much I admire your photographs". Later the tone became friendlier, but the admiration didn't cease: "My Friend, the arrival of your photography lighted up all my day! [...] I can edit a sensational number of *Art Sacré* due to you!" Or "My Friend, please send me a print [...] Some portraits, especially Léger's are amazing! My warmest congratulations!"<sup>2</sup>.

### working with le corbusier

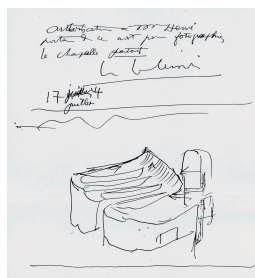
The idea to take photos of Le Corbusier's *unité d'habitation* under construction in Marseille came from Father Couturier. The history of this crucial day and the meeting between Hervé and the oeuvre which resulted in 650 shots is well known. As are the first words written by the architect to the young photographer: "I wish to convey my most sincere congratulations for your exceptional work. You have the soul of an architect and you know how to see architecture"<sup>3</sup>. "He asked me to visit him. [...] –told Hervé– We spoke for a long time about architecture and art [...] he then asked me to take photographs for him, a request I enthusiastically accepted. This required, in his case, all my energies, [...]. From then onwards, I just took photographs, mostly of his works and then modern architecture as a whole"<sup>4</sup>. This meeting meant to Hervé one of the most important events of his career. During the next fifteen years his "fury" towards this unique work of Le Corbusier's he transformed into a systematic and artistic photo collection (much more than documentation) and into an adherence to the urbanistic views of the architect. "My Dear Hervé, it is indispensable that you travel as soon as possible to Marseille to take photos of the *unité d'habitation* before the habitants move in"<sup>5</sup>. The letters requesting such quick reactions are numerous, because Le Corbusier, aware of the promotional potentials of the photography, wanted to be the only master of his image. Wishing to satisfy the architectural magazine's taste he tried to direct the lenses and the foreshortening of Hervé. The soft tone reveals a relationship that is based on great expectations besides the mutual respect and a deepening friendship. "We expect an important propaganda in the daily, weekly and monthly papers on my *unité d'habitation* de Dreieck (Berlin). You have to take positive and impressive images on it, a few but perfect photographs"<sup>6</sup>. The confidence can be felt also through the next extract: Le Corbusier "proposes you to contact his photographer, Lucien Hervé, who owns his entire archives. You can choose the necessary photographs and negotiate with him..."<sup>7</sup>. writes the secretary to one of the magazines in 1955. Next year a big solo exhibition was consecrated to the universe of the architect in Lyon. He turned to Hervé as to an associate who is able to capture and immortalize the spot: "I've received the six photographs from the official photographer of the Lyon Museum. Technically they are good but they give a simple general view. [...] it [the exhibition] summarises remarkably my oeuvre. Everything is in harmony. I consider that we have to use this possibility and highlight it as one of the key events of my work. I ask you to go [to take photos], every time you find enclosed an authorization"<sup>8</sup>. But the maître was not always satisfied with the quality of the prints. Hervé had to support a lot of criticism especially on the dark tone of his photographs "found in the bottom of his drawer"<sup>9</sup> and he had to defend himself: "Undoubtedly, you have seen during these years several inefficient prints due to exhausting work [...]. I had to transmit the first drafts without the possibility to develop necessary proof prints..."<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, his photographer was interested in the composition and the plasticity created by the black and white tones and the quickly enlarged prints were not intended to be exhibited or published.





**f2\_Father Couturier and Le Corbusier**  
Paris, early1950s, FLC / ADAGP. Lucien Hervé

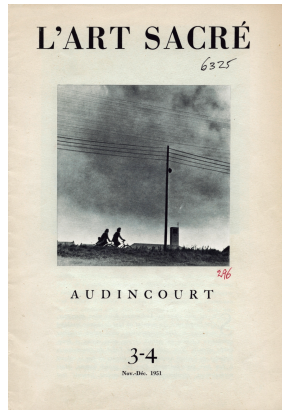
The architect who was amazed by the quality and originality of the first huge series by Hervé proved to be authoritarian, sometimes mean who didn't hesitate to pass orders without any artistic nature. "Dear Monsieur Hervé, Le Corbusier wishes to have his passport renewed and asks you to print some from the old shots if it is possible"<sup>11</sup>. A big majority of their correspondence deals with technical questions, prints to develop and send to clients, financial (dis) agreements and explications. It is not rare to read lines such as: "prepare a reasonable bill for Gropius"<sup>12</sup> or "send me the copy of the bill of these photographs on the lowest price"<sup>13</sup>. It is not surprising that in 1962 Hervé wrote angrily to his mentor "I should accept that I need to find a more profitable profession..."<sup>14</sup>. If Le Corbusier communicated in short letters written mostly by his secretary, Hervé was ready to explain his point of view on long pages that his maître called the "Hervéides"<sup>15</sup>. His bitterness feels through his lines: "I swallowed that the color photographs could not be used for the prints, but you were not interested to see any of my color ones during the thirteen years of collaboration, there are several thousands of them and many concern your work"<sup>16</sup>. But despite the misunderstandings Hervé admired his mentor and resumed this collaboration in a positive tone: "Working with Le Corbusier, in addition to a constant search for purity, I learnt to be present at the moment when beauty appeared. All of this required an even greater strictness and higher expectations from me [...] I better understood that the importance of details is equal to the whole"<sup>17</sup>. Le Corbusier on his side summed up his admiration for the work of his collaborator commenting it as "photography to the highest degree"<sup>18</sup>.



**f3\_Autorisation to Lucien Hervé from Le Corbusier to photographier the Ronchamp Chapel**  
1954. ALH

## photographer of the architects

The reference gained beside Le Corbusier made Hervé sought after among the architects. One of the first to contact him was Paul Nelson. "Dear Monsieur, [...] I've received your name at Le Corbusier's agency as a photographer specialized on architecture. I need some photographs of the American Hospital in Neuilly and I'd like to make contact with you"<sup>19</sup> Marc Quentin, architect of the reconstruction was probably also attracted by the reputation of Le Corbusier's photographer: "I would be happy to see you in Royan where I could show you some of my buildings"<sup>20</sup>. Soon another collaboration became possible due to the Dominican Father Marie-Alain Couturier and the L'Art Sacré magazine. In 1951 a whole issue (n. 3/4) on the newly built church by Maurice Novarina at Audincourt was illustrated with Hervé's photos. "I'd like to express my congratulations concerning the artistic quality of your photographs of the church of Audincourt, which are a real success. [...] I've constructed a building in Paris that several magazines want to publish. Is it possible that you take photos of it?"<sup>21</sup> The success of each work brings new orders, like with Novarina, chief architect for the reconstruction, who turned to Hervé again in 1957 to cover his church of Villeparisis.



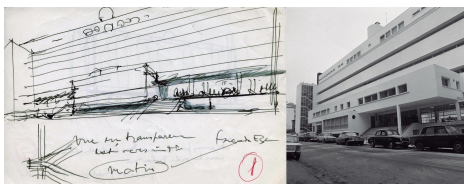
f4\_The cover of the l'Art Sacré review dedicated to Audincourt

n. 3-4, 1951. ALH

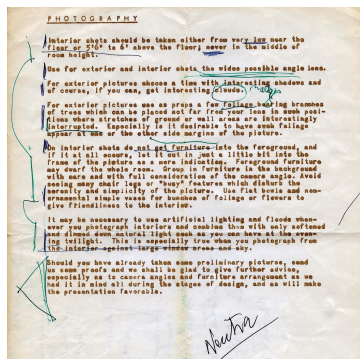
One of the longest and most prestigious commissions of the 1950s was to follow the construction of the parisian Unesco headquarters for three years, between 1955 et 1958. Surprisingly, only one letter attests this challenge with the name of the three main architects on the top: "[...] Since the beginning of the construction work of Unesco Mr Hervé has been preparing outstandingly interesting monthly photo reports [...] At the moment he is working with the artists invited to decorate the building.... He has not yet dealt with Picasso's work, so we would be happy if he could receive Mr. Hervé and show him his oeuvre that he has certainly started for Unesco"<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately this photo-session had never been realized.

In 1952 it was by his work on Le Corbusier's oeuvre that Hervé met Walter Gropius for the first time. In a handwritten note on a letter to Hervé the architect points out their mutual interest: "Gropius opens a door to America, by which you might enter

into the magazines with [the photos on] Marseille<sup>23</sup>. Thanks to this acquaintance Hervé photographed the new American Embassy of Athens (by Gropius with T.A.C.) on his second world tour in 1961. In 1955 and 1961 Hervé extended his visits to India – Chandigarh et Ahmedabad, big le corbusian constructions – by official commissions, like the one of Gropius in Athens, the National Museum of Western Art by Le Corbusier and the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Brasilia in the new capital. Hervé had known the other former Bauhaus architect, Marcel Breuer since the Unesco constructions, and this collaboration brought the commission to photograph the new Bijenkorf store under construction in Rotterdam (1954) and the American Embassy in Hague (1957-59). The correspondence with most architects contains strictly practical questions.



**f5\_Drawing of Georges-Henri Pingusson in the attention of Lucien Hervé**  
ALH, Lucien Hervé: School group "Belle-Feuille" in Boulogne-Billancourt, 1967



f6\_The note of Richard Neutra to his photographers  
1960s, ALH

The majority of official commands leaves little liberty for the photographer. Georges-Henri Pingusson precises in an amical tone: "My Dear Hervé, [...] some remarks: the main façade on the street: you have to show the stairs, the most important elements, the double entrance hall that indicates the school's organization for boys and girls. [...] I prefer the morning hours when the façade is more lighted"<sup>24</sup> Wishing to be surely understood he joins a series of 23 sketches to his letter with the points of view desired on his school-unit at

Boulogne-Billancourt. Richard Neutra seems to have a tendency to use lists of criteria for the photographers of his work **(f6)**. This non-dated document gives not only principles on photographing but determines the “right” angles, lights and composition according to a sort of a general “canon”. Hervé repeated proudly until the end of his life how he revolted against the third point of this list: “Then I audaciously replied that the features of a building are not altered by the presence of a cloud”<sup>25</sup> In spite of this Hervé and the architect stayed on friendly terms that testifies a letter by Dione Neutra inviting him to renew the collaboration in Croix in the Nord of France to photograph the since famous “maison Delcourt”: “Even if the weather should not be good and the garden is not finished, it might be a good idea to go through the house and discuss with Mr. Neutra the angles and the shots that interest him most so that you could possibly come back in the summer when the lawns are green”<sup>26</sup>. The presence of the clouds and the color of the grass stayed seemingly important in the eyes of the architect, but at least the angles became a question of negotiation. In 1969 Neutra father and son worry for Hervé’s health whose multiple sclerosis is more and more invalidating. They both wish him “all the best” and “more wonderful work”<sup>27</sup>.

## **other architectural commissions**

From the beginning of the 1950s Hervé was contacted by architectural authors like Paul Damaz (1952) or Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1956). In his letter Hitchcock precises: “The photograph that I need of the Unité at Marseilles is a general view from the street side that includes the entire building”<sup>28</sup> His demands contain no original and free interpretations to his book in the otherwise famous series of Pelican History of Art by Nicolaus Pevsner. In the same period Hervé built a close collaboration with international architectural magazines like the Italian *Casabella* or the *Domus*, the Spanish *Informes de la Construcción*, the English *Architectural Review* or the French *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. Gio Ponti, the founder of *Domus*, André Bloc from the French magazine even became close friends.

It was not only the architects, the authors or the professional magazines but also the museum curators who contacted Hervé to present the work of Le Corbusier. An amusing exchange of letters reveals the preparation of a big event overseas. Arthur Drexler, curator at the MOMA in New York turned to the photographer: “Dear Monsieur Hervé, [...] We are planning a large exhibition of Le Corbusier’s work in October of 1955. If you have other photographs of his buildings, sculpture, etc. I would like to see you when I get to Paris, which will be during the summer of 1954”<sup>29</sup>. “Dear Monsieur Drexler, [...] I have approximately 10.000 photographs of Le Corbusier’s work (buildings, plans, models, sculptures, paintings, drawings, gouaches, cuts-outs, etc.) So, I will not only be happy to see you when you come to Paris but I think to be really useful for you as well”<sup>30</sup>. Finally Hervé sent more than 100 “prints in assorted sizes” to New York, which all came back to him later as the show didn’t realize before 1963 and 1965. But Hervé’s photos propagated the architecture of his mentor on several occasions like on the centenary exhibition in the Helsinki Architectural Museum, organized in 1987 by an old friend, Aarno Ruusvuori. During his journeys Hervé met several architects and forged friendships all over the world. Alvar Aalto, Aulis Blomstedt, Wilson Reis-Netto are only a few representatives of his connections who did not commission work from him but who became his collaborators in organizing his exhibitions or publishing articles. The Belgian Pierre Puttemans and the Hungarian Máté Major and Attila Batár historians of architecture not only became close friends but also invited Hervé to publish together. Françoise Choay, Michel Ragon also chose Hervé’s shots to illustrate their analysis in the 1950s. In 1958, by the intermediary of Jesús de la Sota spanish artist Hervé got two commissions to prepare books on the Escorial and later the vernacular architecture of the Balearic Islands. The “geometrical adventure” on the Escorial, visioned and prepared

by Hervé for ten years was never realised because of the death of the editor. In 1962 he accompanied two excavations of the French Institute of Archeology in the Middle East in the regions of Palmyra and the Mount Simeon and published a big study with the help of a local archaeologist, Georges Kalemkerian.

Involved more and more in the architects' universe Hervé participated in the CIAM Congresses at Aix-en-Provence (1953) and in Dubrovnik (1956) and was jury member of the publication Films sur l'art (1960) by the FIFA (Fédération Internationale du Film sur l'Art) and Unesco beside André Chastel and Gerrit Rietveld. In 1973 he becomes member of the Cercle d'Études Architecturales, from the 1970s he's an active member of graduation juries in Villette School of Architecture, the École Camondo, the Special School of Architecture in Paris but the Education Ministry sent him with Charlotte Perriand et Aristomenis Provelengios at Besancon (1970) as well. These activities got more importance in his life after 1965 when he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.



## f7\_Le magazine Carré Bleu

with the participation of Lucien Hervé in the 1970s

This paper concentrates only on the part of Lucien Hervé's oeuvre that is unveiled by his written documents and especially by his correspondence. The photographic work on commission proved to be often restrictive but Hervé had his camera in hand when walking on the streets abroad or on his holidays in France. He took again the pen that was his principal tool as a journalist before World War II to write about his impressions and immersed into the study of the history, literature, architecture and urbanism of the countries he visited. In his publications as early as the 1950s he juxtaposed texts and photos on vernacular, historic and modern architecture of India, Japan, Mexico or Brasilia and he was especially profoundly touched by the ruined cities of the late antique and Byzantine Syria. These articles in the Aujourd'hui, Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Jardin des Arts, Courrier des Messageries Maritimes or in the Connaissance du Monde and in Carré Bleu testify a strong vision and a clear opinion concerning historic or contemporary architectural creations. Hervé conceived his numerous books and exhibitions in the same spirit composing dialogues between ages and works to invite his public on a reflective journey around built environment. How did he succeed to be faithful to his own view and conviction amid the various expectations of the photographic commissions? Talking about the secret of his harmonic work with Le Corbusier Hervé revealed his general motto: "I've always tried to understand his thinking which doesn't mean to accept everything, but

rather to ask questions about it. I have always asked myself questions about what I do. [...] I kept in mind, that to do a good job I should not go further than what he wanted to say with his constructions"<sup>31</sup>.

Honored by the French Architectural Academy in 1993 Lucien Hervé received the Fine Arts Medal as the first photographer in the institution's history.

## endnotes

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4. Batár, Attila, *Lucien Hervé*. 56.
5. Le Corbusier to LH, July 28 1952, ALH
6. Le Corbusier to LH, September 25 1957, ALH
7. The secretary of Le Corbusier to Marc Eaubonne, March 15 1955, ALH
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9. Le Corbusier to LH, October 28 1954, ALH
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18. Le Corbusier to LH, August 3, 1956, Cap Martin - Roquebrune
19. Richard Neutra to LH, ALH
20. Marc Quentin to LH, February 24 1953
21. Maurice Novarina to LH, February 12 1952, Thonon, ALH
22. Pierre Marcel to Raoul Erena, February 6 1956 Paris, ALH
23. Le Corbusier to LH, March 5 1953, Paris, ALH
24. Georges-Henri Pingusson to LH on the December 19 1967, Paris, ALH
25. Batár, Attila. *Lucien Hervé*. 103.
26. Dione Neutra to LH, March 25 1969, Zurich, ALH
27. Letter of Dione Neutra to LH, April 29 1969, Vienne, ALH
28. H-R Hitchcock to LH, September 14 1956, London
29. Arthur Drexler to LH, December 30, 1953, New York, ALH
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\_Fondation Le Corbusier.

## **CV**

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